

Just how old is that buck you are staring down the barrel at? Maybe not as old as you might think. In an average year, one half of the male deer taken during a Fort Riley deer hunting season will be 1½ year old or less. At this age a buck has probably only realized 10 percent of its potential antler development, since peak maturity is not reached until at least 5½ years of age. It may be uncommon in some parts of the country to have the chance to hunt bucks that are much older than yearlings, but on Fort Riley, that opportunity does exist and we would like that to continue. We would like to encourage hunters to let these young bucks pass and harvest either a doe or wait for that more mature buck to come by.

Choosing a doe over a young buck not only improves the age structure of male deer it also leads to a healthier deer herd. An increased density of mature bucks and a more equal buck to doe ratio will lead to a more “normal” breeding season. This means one that is shorter, but more intense, and earlier in the fall than one with too many does and few mature bucks. Mature bucks produce sex hormones that they leave on trees and the ground in the form of rubs and scrapes, which stimulate does to enter into estrus. This shortened, earlier breeding season is less stressful on bucks and equates to fawns that are born in late spring when nutrition is the best and growing time before winter is maximized. Bucks will also have to compete for receptive does so that the strongest and healthiest bucks will pass on their genes to the next generation.

Trying to get an accurate age on a buck with maybe only a few critical seconds of shot opportunity is definitely not an exact science, but with a few general body and antler characteristics, along with in the field experience, a good decision can often be made.

“Button buck” is the name given to male deer when they are less than a year old. These buck fawns will have small nubs on their head in the fall hunting season that are barely visible since they do not protrude through the hide. For this reason they are commonly mistaken for mature does. Buck fawns will have a shorter and more compact head than an adult doe and will have a flat forehead as opposed to the rounded forehead of a doe. Buck fawns are often seen alone in the fall while does are commonly in groups. The best way to avoid harvesting a buck fawn when deciding to take a doe is to wait for more than one deer to be present so a body size comparison can be made.



Yearling bucks have been known to have as many as twelve antler points but will mostly have 8 or less. Regardless of points, they will have antlers that are thin throughout the main beams and points, rarely exceeding ¾ of an inch in diameter. Yearling bucks appear to have long legs for their bodies, thin necks, high flanks, and rumps that are higher than their shoulders. They basically look like a doe with antlers.

At 2 ½ years the size of the antlers will usually catch your attention. For this reason they make up a large percent of the buck harvest each year, but their antlers are still just beginning to grow. They will still have relatively thin antlers. As bucks begin to mature they will develop a thick and muscular neck, heavily muscled hindquarters, and legs that no longer appear long for their bodies. At 3 ½ years a buck will still have a straight back and stomach, resembling a well-conditioned racehorse. Though some may possess impressive antler qualities, they have only seen about 75 percent development. The pictures to the right are examples of a 2½ and a 3½-year-old deer.



At full maturity bucks will develop a swayed back and a “pot-belly” due to carrying extra weight. Their large necks will blend into their chest, and their legs will appear short when compared to their massive bodies. Their face will lengthen with age and their eyes will begin to appear squinty. Antler qualities will most likely make their maturity level undeniable. Increased mass and length of main beams are characteristics most related to age. Given the quality habitat and nutrition that can be found on Fort Riley, bucks are capable of sustaining a full maturity level for three to five years before succumbing to old age. The buck on the left is 4½ years old while the one to the right is 5 ½.



Given the chance to grow, most young bucks on Fort Riley have equal potential to these mature deer pictured above. The common hunting method of, “if its brown its down,” will lead to very few young bucks reaching maturity. If more hunters are willing to change to this more selective harvest strategy, Fort Riley could change from being a good place to deer hunt to being one of the best around.